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George Taylor Files

1866-1919



Brunswick, Maine

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GEORGE TAYLOR FILES

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Contents

	Page
Chapel Address	5
By Kenneth Charles Morton Sills, LL.D., President of Bowdoin College	
From the Records of the College Faculty	12
Editorial from the Portland Evening Express	14



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Chapel Address

May 4, 1919

By President Sills

For the third time within two years the College is called upon to mourn the loss of one who gave to her the service of a lifetime and whose brilliant talents were placed whole-heartedly at her feet. More than most organizations the college is personal and living. The college deals with persons, not with things, with the spirits of men, not with property. And while in the modern college there is of necessity a rather elaborate system of administration, while there are many activities that center about a rather complicated social and athletic life, when you come down to the heart of things, the college consists of those who teach and those who are taught. In no other business of life are men so closely and so intimately associated, and the association is usually for long periods of time and often for life, as on the faculty of a small college; and in no other relations are there more personal contacts than between teachers and students. The outside world does not well consider

Bowdoin College

this ; careless observers do not understand it. But we who are all members of the College who work and study and play here together realize our common loss when in the prime of life one is taken from us whom we have respected and honored and loved as colleague and teacher.

George Taylor Files was born at Portland, September 23, 1866. His father was a well known Portland school teacher and principal, and it was of course natural that the son should go to the home schools. He fitted for college at the Portland High School where he graduated in 1885. It was also natural that he should go to the college with which his native city has more associations than with any other institution, so that he came to Bowdoin and soon was one of the leaders of his class both in scholarship and in other activities such as the glee club and in gymnastic exhibitions. He took his degree here in 1889 graduating at the head of his class. In college he had shown such interest in intellectual things that it was no surprise to his friends when he decided upon an academic career. He studied at Johns Hopkins from 1889 to 1890 and in Europe from 1891 to 1893 taking his Ph. D. degree from the University of Leipsic in 1893. Most of his graduate work was done in Anglo-Saxon and in other Germanic languages. His residence in Germany gave him an excellent command

George Taylor Files

of that language, which he spoke with unusual facility and accuracy. As things turned out most of his life was given to administration and teaching; consequently he had little opportunity for pure scholarship. But his dissertation on the Anglo-Saxon house and one or two critical editions of German works showed that he had been well trained and that he possessed scholarly instincts.

All of his teaching was done at Bowdoin. From 1890 to 1891 he was tutor in languages here giving instruction for the most part in Greek—an admirable preparation for his later work. From 1891 to 1894 he was instructor in German, a part of the time on leave of absence to study. In 1894 he became professor of German, which position he held until his death. In 1894 he married Miss Edith Davis, of Portland, who supported him devotedly in all his generous impulses, who with him gave to the College each year a fund that brought some of the most famous clergymen of the country here to Brunswick as college preachers. In 1899 he studied social conditions in Germany; during the academic year 1905-06 he resided in Europe; in 1909 he spent six months and in 1913 he spent nine months in foreign travel; and his last leave of absence to do over-seas work with the-Y. M. C. A. extended from February, 1918, until his death, April

Bowdoin College

23, 1919. The distinguishing feature of Mr. Files' teaching was his enthusiasm. He always made his classes interesting and popular, and he felt that the best methods to employ in stimulating his students were constant encouragement and liberal praise.

As is the case with too many teachers on the faculties of our colleges, very much of Mr. Files' time was taken by administrative duties. From 1897 until 1905 he was registrar of the College, an officer who, as there was then no dean, had to come into close contact with the students and help them with their programme of studies. Mr. Files gave an enormous amount of time to this work, and with the assistance of Professor MacDonald changed our old fashioned methods and founded the recording activities of the College on a sound basis. That office meant a great deal of attention to dreary details, sacrifice of time and energy and the leisure that is absolutely necessary for good scholarship. Such service is too often ill repaid. I should like here to make public acknowledgement of the great debt of the College for labors cheerfully and willingly performed. In many other ways Mr. Files was active on the Faculty. To the work of the very useful committee that has charge of the buildings and grounds he contributed very much; he felt that beautiful surroundings have not only an artistic but an edu-

George Taylor Files

cational value, and he did very much to make our campus a thing of beauty. His friendly ways and his ability to work with others made him popular with all with whom he came in contact; and it is high praise and the kind of praise he would like, to say that nowhere will he be more kindly remembered than by the janitors and other employees of the College.

It has been one of the fondest traditions of the College since her earliest days that the members of the Faculty should take a lively interest in the affairs of the community. From the time of Parker Cleaveland down there have always been men on the Faculty who have been fond of Brunswick, who have given of their time and thought to the town, and whose advice and counsels have been sought by the authorities of the town. Such a man was Mr. Files. He was president of the Village Improvement Society, of the Brunswick Dramatic Club; he had been a member of the local school committee and had been a candidate for the legislature. A prominent citizen of Brunswick said recently he was not a man who could be spared. And his activities extended also to the State. Throughout Maine he was regarded not only as perhaps the best known member of Bowdoin's Faculty, but as the original and consistent champion of good roads. He was

Bowdoin College

one of the leading highway experts of the State; he did much to secure progressive legislation, and he gave very freely of his time and of his money to the cause. He also was an early advocate of aeronautics, and with Admiral Peary founded a society, before the war, to secure better protection by means of air craft for our long Maine sea coast. The extent of Mr. Files' services to Maine may be estimated from the fact that in nearly every State newspaper of importance from Portland to Houlton there were editorials devoted to him—some of which declared that in the history of Maine his name would ever hold an honored place.

His labors for college, town, and state were fittingly crowned by the glorious opportunity that he seized to be of service to his fellowmen on the battlefields of France. For a man of his years and health and temperament, to insist on going over-seas simply from the call of duty was in itself an act of high patriotism. When he left Brunswick he made light of the dangers and hardships he was liable to incur, and said simply that it seemed to him imperative that a man in his position with his knowledge of languages and his experience should do something for his country at the time of her dire need. Those of us who had heard him speak in Memorial Hall last December and who even then were anxious about his physical condi-

George Taylor Files

tion realized that to a man of his sensibilities service with the Y. M. C. A. in the danger zone had been indeed hazardous. No man can penetrate the veil Fate draws over human beings and their actions, yet it seems altogether probable that had Mr. Files been less zealous in his work, had he taken greater precautions for his health, he might be with us today. As it is, he has left to us all a splendid memory of one who gave himself fully and gladly, of another golden star on our Bowdoin banner shining forth as an example of patriotism and self sacrifice. The scholar has finished his learning; the teacher has taught his last class and left to us all a noble example of industry and devotion. Best of all his service abroad unstintedly given, his last illness borne with patience and courage and marked consideration for others, have won for him praise higher than usually falls to mortals. Here at Bowdoin he will long be remembered as a very kindly and very brave man.

From the Records of the College Faculty

For twenty-seven years Professor George Taylor Files was a valued and loved member of this Faculty. He was an able and inspiring teacher; his thorough training and scholarship, his linguistic attainments, his appreciation of the best in literature, his broad human interests, his genial personality, and his sincere concern for the welfare of his students, aroused in them a desire to excel and won their hearty admiration and affection. He also possessed marked ability as an organizer and administrator. His tactfulness in dealing with men, his systematic thoroughness, his love of order, and the patient attention to details which he always gave, as a member of important Faculty committees, and particularly during the years when he was Registrar, enabled him to render valuable service to the College.

His death has brought to his many friends, and especially to us, his colleagues, a deep sense of personal bereavement. With gratitude we recall our many years of close association and friendly intimacy with him,—his generosity and geniality, his eagerness and enthusiasm. With pride we shall cherish the memory of his bravery and self-sacrifice

George Taylor Files

in leaving his family and the many comforts of his home to go over-seas and carry good cheer and give his invaluable assistance to wounded and suffering soldiers. And ever with gratitude and pride we shall recall that he, our friend and colleague, heroically gave his best, even his life, to uphold the principles of freedom and democracy, of justice and righteousness, which Bowdoin College has always endeavored to teach to her sons.

Editorial: Portland Evening Express

The whole State mourns the loss of Professor George T. Files whose death occurred yesterday. Few men in Maine had a larger circle of true friends, and no man deserved them more. Facing the best years of his career, with wonderful ability to carry through anything which he undertook, his life meant much to the State he loved so well. His remarkable work for better highways in Maine, for the upbuilding and development of the State along progressive lines, his exceptional ability as a public speaker, and his driving force in any cause which he felt was right, will never be forgotten. Bowdoin owes much to Professor Files and the thousands of boys who passed under his guiding hand during his many years' connection with that institution, will always recall with deepest reverence the splendid memories of those days. Among business men he was recognized as possessing marked ability. A tireless worker for his friends, for his State, and for his country, with never a thought of self, he practically offered himself as a sacrifice to the causes for which he fought. Never exceptionally robust the great strain of his work in Europe was too

George Taylor Files

much for him, and his heart and constitution could not stand up against it. The name of George T. Files will live long in the memory of the people of Maine. Even after the present generation has passed away the results of his work will live and be remembered.

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